Let's face it: most application developers are not graphic designers. Despite this fact, they frequently are tasked with making an application “look good.” Oddly enough, you rarely hear about graphic designers being tasked with creating entity-relationship diagrams, tuning slow queries, and the like.

Good design is extremely difficult to create, yet amazingly simple to recognize. A well-designed site can exude a level of confidence to your users that will make them feel more confident about the quality of the goods or services that your site provides, even if it is nothing more than a simple department-level application. Unfortunately, it takes all of a second or two to realize whether or not a web site was professionally designed.

And while looks are not everything, they do make a lasting first impression on your users. You would be much less likely to provide personal information to or purchase something from a site riddled with spelling and grammar errors. Hackers know this, and so they go to great lengths to make phishing sites look identical to the sites that they are mimicking. This alone has caused many otherwise intelligent individuals to fall victim to credit card fraud and identity theft. While we surely do not endorse such behavior, the point is clear: looks do make a difference, for better or for worse.

Fortunately, not every site that you create needs to have an expensive, award-winning design. That would simply not be practical, necessary, or even possible. A good, achievable goal should be to make your applications look like you bought them from a vendor, rather than built them yourself.

APEX gives you a jump-start by providing 20 prebuilt sets of templates called themes. You can use any of these built-in themes in your applications with little to no modification. While these themes may not be revolutionary in terms of their design, they are more than adequate for most business and other applications. The new themes provided with APEX 4.0 provide a much more professional look and feel than those in previous versions.

This chapter will not teach you graphic design principles or how to become an expert in Photoshop, but it will outline some of the features in APEX that can help you, as a developer, make your application look professional, crisp, and clean.

Themes

The main user interface component that APEX provides is themes. Themes, an APEX shared component, are a logical collection of templates and their associated defaults. Themes have attributes, which dictate which templates are used as defaults for APEX regions and components. Aside from that, themes have little to no bearing on the actual user interface of an application. Templates, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, control how an application looks and feels.

APEX 4.0 ships with 20 built-in, ready-to-use themes, as shown in Figure 10-1. Some are more professional-looking and better suited for business applications; others are designed to look more hip and modern. You can use any of these themes “as-is” in your own applications, or make modifications to a theme’s corresponding templates to suit your specific needs.
More often than not, developers tend to choose one of the built-in themes and make a few minor changes to it. They then use this slightly altered theme throughout all of their applications.

An APEX application can contain one or more themes. However, only one theme can be set to the current or active theme per application. Changing the current theme can be achieved only at design time by an APEX developer. Users of an application cannot elect to change themes during runtime. Although this is a limitation, it is unlikely that you will need more than one theme per application.

**Figure 10-1. Two of APEX 4.0’s 20 built-in themes**

**Associating a Theme with an Application**

When creating an application, you have the following two ways to select which theme to associate with it: